THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF SAINT MARY THE VIRGIN

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Metacosmesis Mundi Per Incarnationem

The Immaculate Conception

of

Saint Mary The Virgin

AN EIRENIC ESSAY

by

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Forword

The position occupied by Saint Mary the Virgin, both in the theological theory and devotional practice of historical Anglicanism has recently suffered from hesitancy of commitment and equivocation of discussion. Since the time of Papal Definition of the Corporal Assumption of our Lady as "of Faith," and therefore on a strict par with all other items of the Catholic Creeds, questions concerning St. Mary's place in the scheme of Christian redemption are being forced anew upon our attention. A good many recent Anglican responses are coloured by a re-emergence of the historical (in the beginning, political) British anti-Papalism of Reformation times.

Anglicans have the right, sometimes the duty, to controvert certain latter-day Papal Definitions as derogatory of the Catholic Faith. I would include among these the Dogma of Papal Infallibility (which seems to replace the whole Body of the Church Militant in earth by the individual person of the Bishop of Rome;) and the Dogma of the Corporal Assumption of our Lady (which tends towards replacing the Incarnate Flesh and Blood of our Lord as the nexus between earth and heaven, between man and God, by the flesh and blood of St. Mary.)

On the other hand, no doctrine should be rejected as not containing truth merely because it has been Papally defined in counter-Reformational times. One such doctrine, that of the Immaculate Conception of St. Mary, appears, indeed, strongly entrenched in a sound Anglican tradition. In addition, this Dogma can be interpreted in terms which illuminate Liturgical theology. And because the Anglican Communion is making significant contributions to what is known as the Liturgical Movement in the Church, Anglicans perhaps more than most others ought to be exploring the meaning of St. Mary's bestowed freedom from Original Sin in relation to the theory of the Liturgical Offertory in the Christian Mass. Some brief notes on this question are here set forth.

F. Hastings Smyth, Ph.D.

July, 1954

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There is no doubt that since the Reformation Anglicanism has suffered a serious cultural invasion from the direction of a Protestant ethos. The lofty position assigned to the Mother of our Lord, both theologically and in popular devotional practice in the ancient tradition of the Catholic Church, has been one of the principal objects of this Protestant attack. This is probably one reason why some contemporary Anglicans who are fully Catholic in outlook nevertheless are slightly discomfited by the name of the Dogma, "The Immaculate Conception," and sense a kind of atmospheric uneasiness when it is used. But the Anglican Church has never wavered officially (whatever may be said of the emotions of large numbers of her members) in upholding that Catholic tradition of our Lady's sinlessness.

First of all, we are committed as Anglicans to calling her *Theotokos*[1] or Mother of God; for this is her title exactly defined by the Third and Fourth General Councils, those of Ephesus and Chalcedon, to which the Anglican Church has staunchly adhered. As Jeremy Taylor puts it: "The Church of England receives the four first General Councils as of highest regard, not that they are infallible, but that they have determined wisely and holily."[2] And precisely because the Virgin Mary is truly recognized as the Mother of God by the whole Church Catholic, East and West including the Anglicans, it has always appeared

[1] Greek, Tikto, meaning for the mother "to bear," for the father "to beget."
[2] A DISSUASIVE FROM POPERY, Quoted in ANGLICANISM, ed. More & Cross, p. 162.

to the Church, as the American Episcopalian theologian, Dr. Francis J. Hall points out,[3] that "it was fitting that the Blessed Virgin should be sanctified for her unique function of bearing the Eternal Word; and the salutation of Gabriel implied that such sanctification had already taken place—*before* the Holy Spirit caused her to conceive." Dr. Hall goes on to say, with respect to the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, that although it was not explicitly re-affirmed by post-Reformational Anglican authorities, nevertheless, "the opinion is not heretical (i.e. relative to Anglican teaching,) for its maintainers acknowledge that the Blessed Virgin's sanctification was in any case an effect—anticipatively realized—of Christ's redemptive work."

Fr. H. E. Symonds, C. R., in his too little known inquiry, THE COUNCIL OF TRENT AND ANGLICAN FORMULARIES,[4] points out that the Prayer Book retained the Feast of the Conception of the BVM in the English Kalendar in the face of the widely-understood fact that this was "a feast which only came to be observed when the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception was being stressed," and that "the Feast was associated with the dogma, and it was kept specially in England."[5]

The Seventeenth Century Anglican Bishop of Chester, John Pearson, in his EXPOSITION OF THE CREED, a work universally welcomed by all sections of his contemporary Church and still in use in many Anglican seminaries, speaks of Mary as a "most pure immaculate Virgin." He continues: "If Elizabeth cried out with so loud a voice, Blessed art thou among women, when Christ was but newly conceived in her womb, what expressions of honour and admiration can we think sufficient now that Christ is in heaven, and that mother with Him. Far be it from any Christian to derogate from that special privilege granted her, which is *incommunicable to any other*." (Emphasis added.) Many Anglicans of this age forget that their own post-Reformational Divines were wont to launch panegyrics of this temper to the Blessed Virgin Mother of God. Yet Bishop Pearson writes as if the Immaculate Conception might almost be taken for granted, since he calls our Lady "immaculate" and says this privilege of hers is

[3] THEOLOGICAL OUTLINES, Revised by F. H. Hallock, p. 160.
[4] London, 1933, p. 18.
[5] Ibid, p. 19, note 1.

'incommunicable to any other." In other words, our Lady's condition of grace is unique among all other created human beings. Bishop Pearson seems to go even further, and to hint at some doctrine of the Assumption when he says that Christ's mother is now in heaven with Him. In our present connection, we have no reason to press this interesting point.

Perhaps one may say that after all, such "exaggerated" ways of talking are not in the *official* vein of Anglican formularies. We should therefore also note that in the authoritative and officially promulgated Homily on Repentance it is said that "Jesus Christ, Who being true and natural (sic) God, equal and of one substance with the Father, did at the time appointed take upon Him our frail nature, in the Blessed Virgin's womb, and that of *her undefiled* substance."[6] Perhaps, too, most of us are not customarily immersed in the cultural ethos of the Anglican Homilies; but we certainly read the Prayer Book itself year by year. The Collect for Christmas Day speaks of our Lord as "born of a *pure* Virgin," and in the Preface for this Feast it is said of our Lord that He "by the operation of the Holy Ghost was made very man of the *substance* of His mother: and that[7] without spot of sin to make us clean from all sin." If all this language does not teach the spotlessness, that is the immaculate state of St. Mary the Theotokos, it is hard to see how words have any meaning at all.

The foregoing facts cannot be brushed aside; for they show decisively that Protestant or "liberal-minded" Christians within our Communion who fail to accord to our Lady the unique position and high honour due her in the scheme of our redemption in the Incarnation and as the Immaculate Mother of God, are not only not within the full Catholic tradition (which may not cause them much loss of sleep,) but they are not even within that Central Anglicanism of which they do for the most part profess themselves to be the true and proper supporters. But those Anglicans who take the formulations of their historic Church seriously, in order to build correctly for the Church into the future, need in no way to apologize, or even to "feel" apologetic, when they come forward to affirm plainly that our Lady is Theotokos, Mother of God, as proclaimed by the Oecumenical Councils. And they

[6] S.P.C.K. edition, p. 564, emphasis added.
[7] Latin Prayer Book, *idque,* which carries the overtone of "for that reason."

would be disagreeing with the Prayer Book if they did not also proclaim that she is "pure," of "undefiled substance" and "without spot of sin," which is to say *immaculate.*

THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION AND THE LITURGY

It is possible to advance beyond those arguments in favour of belief in the uniquely immaculate state of the Mother of God which rest upon the insights of the merely "devotional," of the sense of "fitness" that the Mother of the Incarnate Word should be sanctified for her lofty vocation in a special way,[8] beyond the sound emotional impulse to accord to our Lady an exceptionally honorific status. All these historical arguments do indeed point in the right direction. But the "putting forward" by our Lady of that substance of human nature which was to be received and utilized by the Logos in His Incarnation, was a liturgically Offertorial act. We Christians now understand, through our Lord's subsequent human life and His Sacrifice, that only a human being within the Incarnation is capable of setting forth a gift taken from this world so perfected that it can be received by God the Father when it is sacrificed to Him. In other words, only the Incarnate Christ Himself, either in the form of the Man Jesus individually, or through His subsequent Incarnational human members in His Church who work *agentially* for Him in later history, can successfully offer Sacrifice to God.

Human beings are made members of our Lord's Body in this world and are thus given such status that when "they" prepare an Offertory for Sacrifice to God, it is *not they,* but Christ within them and among them Who prepares this Offertory. The sacrifice of the Christian Offertory is not, therefore, a sacrifice prepared and offered by *men* to God; but rather, it is a sacrifice (material, certainly, and constituted of the elements of this world) perfected and offered by God the Son Incarnate in this world, and conveyed by Him to His Father in Eternity. The Christian Sacrifice, therefore, is that of the Church, of the Logos Incarnate continuing within history.

[8] cf. Hall, loc. cit.

It would therefore seem a necessity of reason that our Lady, who was and still is an essentially human person, could not have presented the *pioneer* Offertory of her human nature as the vehicle of the initiation of the Incarnation unless she had received such status that "her" Offertory should be already in a genuine sense an Offertory prepared by God the Son and through her only as His Agent, already incorporated into His redeeming Body in this world. In other words, God must have bestowed upon St. Mary in advance that status of Incarnational agential Offertorial action which thereafter was to be bestowed upon all the rest of us in subsequent history by the Sacrament of Baptism. Otherwise, of St. Mary alone would it have to be said that she, as a human being within the fallen world and as yet quite outside our Lord's social Body, His Church, was able to present an Offertorial Victim of *human* contriving which could be successfully moved into a position of full acceptance by God in sacrifice. To suggest such a thing is to say what the Incarnation itself denies, namely, that man can contribute to his own salvation by his human works. This is the position which Luther properly denounced in the spectacular emphasis of the Reformation. To suggest it is to embrace that Pelagian heresy of which, unfortunately, Catholics are sometimes still accused by those who have not taken the trouble to examine the true Catholic position, and by those also who have a deficient belief in the historical Church as the real Body of Christ within which "we" work not as independent human beings but as the incorporate and organic agents (or members) of the Incarnate Lord.

But in the unique case of our Lady, the Body of the Incarnate Lord (i.e. the Church) was not yet initiated in the historical process. Actually this Body was about to be initiated by the reception of its natural foundation matter from *her* natural humanity. The natural seed of the future Incarnation was waiting to be found in Mary. But in order that she should put forward this seed for the purposes of the Body of the Logos, even before that Body became informed at the moment of the conception of the individual Man Jesus, we can argue that she must have had the *status* of membership in that Body. Our Lady must have been given in advance the status of a baptised person. This unique endowment of baptized status pre-bestowed we can identify with her Immaculate Conception.[9] The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception

[9] See this author's DISCERNING THE LORD'S BODY, pp 75-76.

thus viewed is the central and adequately formidable defense against the charge of Pelagianism which is brought against Catholicism by various Protestant schools of thought, notably the Barthian or neo-orthodox. That Catholics support this doctrine demonstrates that they too understand fallen man's incompetence to do anything that is good for his own salvation, even better than do the protesting Protestants.

THE UNIQUE QUALITY OF ST. MARY'S OFFERTORY

It has been asked, "Why the Immaculate *Conception* of Blessed Mary?" Her immaculate status, her baptised status, at the time of the Annunciation (in the light of the preceding argument) seems a necessary deduction. This also appears, as we have now seen, part of the specifically Anglican, as well as of the general Catholic tradition. But why should this status have been bestowed at the moment of her conception, or, as St. Thomas puts it, at the moment of her animation? We other human beings in later history are baptised after we are born. We pass a certain portion of our lives as fallen and unregenerate creatures before we are taken up into our Lord's Body and are thus given the high privilege of acting as His agents in the preparation of Offerings and Gifts for use in continuing Sacrifice. Why then, if it is the status of baptism alone which St. Mary required for her First Offertory in the Incarnation, could not this status have been bestowed, as upon other men, at a later time in her own life, at the moment, for instance, of the Annunciation?

The answer to this last question is that the Blessed Virgin's Offertory was not only quantitatively distinct from those of other men, in that it was the very *first* of a whole series of Offertories in history; her Offertory was also qualitatively distinct from all other Offertories subsequently prepared through other human beings. Those Offertories prepared through us, His baptised members in this world, for movement within our Lord's Sacrifice, are always solely quantitative additions to the content of His Body growing in earth. They are added elements of content taken up by our Lord as materials of His continuing redeeming growth in history. They are thus exclusively *accidental* additions (quantitative additions) to the growth of His Body. That Body is already

present in all Its essential qualitative perfection in this world, and is in process of including us within It. The liturgical Offertories make no further qualitative contributions to It. By way of human example and analogy, it is true that when the man Peter eats a portion of food, his substance comes to include it as a quantitative and therefore accidental addition. Peter grows in his body from a baby to a man; but in this quantitative growth in the content of his substance, his human essence is not qualitatively changed. Big or little, young or old, Peter remains qualitatively and essentially himself; that is to say, Peter. Likewise, our liturgical Offertories contribute nothing to the essential or qualitative perfection of our Lord's Incarnational Humanity in this world. They contribute instead, accidentally to Its quantitative growth. In so far as this fallen world is caused by Him to make contributions to such growth, the world experiences an ever more widely spreading quantitative redemption.

But the Blessed Virgin's Offertory was not a contribution of quantitative content to an Incarnational organic Substance already in existence and in process of being brought into further act by quantitative contributions from the direction of human living. On the contrary, the natural Body of our Lord was not in existence at all before the Annunciation. It was a mere potentiality. To the Blessed Virgin, there was no Body of the Logos in existence to whose Substance a quantitative or accidental *addition* could be made. Our Lady's Offertory therefore was not one which was to be *taken into* our Lord's Body. It was, instead, an Offertory to the Divine Logos prior to His Incarnation, of that this-world seed which He required to *initiate* that Body into which others should *thereafter* be enabled to contribute in liturgical Sacrifice. Therefore, our Lady's Offertory was not *to* our Lord's Body, but rather to the still non-Incarnate Logos; to Whom she put forward that natural and human element which He required as the initial seed of that Body to which future quantitative Offertorial contributions should be made. In other words, St. Mary was called upon to give our Lord the seed of His very humanity, of His human nature in that essential substantial qualitative perfection which It was never again to lose throughout all the subsequent history of Its redeeming quantitative growth and spread. Now *this* qualitatively perfect seed of the humanity of the Incarnation must have been given by God the Father to St. Mary, in order that she might in turn convey it in Offertory to the Divine Logos. And this unique possession of a perfected essence of human nature for

such a lofty use must have been St. Mary's from the moment of her own Conception. Otherwise, that humanity which she possessed, even if redeemed and perfected at a later point in her life, even if removed from the spot of Original Sin after her birth, as we are, by a status of baptism bestowed later in her life, must in that case have contained within itself a history of *having been redeemed* out of a fallen world.

But the humanity of the Lord's Incarnation, and the substantial seed of His perfect Body has Itself *never been redeemed;* for It is Itself prior to our redemption and It is that newly perfected Substance which Itself redeems us as we are received into It. What the Logos required for His Incarnation was not a *re*perfected humanity, but a humanity without a substantial history of any previous imperfection whatever. In other words, our Lady's Offertory to Him Who was to be her Divine Son was that of a true humanity, the humanity of the race of Adam; but that humanity in a state of original perfection. To bestow such a perfected essence of humanity upon a fallen human being at some later time of his growth would necessarily entail not the redemption, but the *destruction* of the fallen nature already present, and its replacement by a new (and miraculously) created qualitatively perfected nature. We conclude, therefore, that since God never destroys any element in His creation, but always redeems it, the Blessed Virgin's human essence was perfected at the moment of its Conception. It was never part of the *fallen* process of this world. Although it was completely within this world's history, it never had need of that redemption which *we* require within the subsequent process of the Incarnation. Our Lady's nature was continuous with humanity, but it was discontinuous with its fallen-ness and with Original Sin. This was St. Mary's unique status and possession: To offer to the Logos the essentially perfect seed of His world-redeeming Body.

To suggest that St. Mary was specially "redeemed" or perfected at some moment subsequent to her Conception, is to fall into an error akin to the Christological error of Adoptionism. If our Lord had been merely a "good" human being "adopted" by God the Father for the purposes of redeeming the world, then the Incarnation would have required the *destruction* of a partly matured natural human *person* called "Jesus" and the *replacement* of this human person by the Divine Person of the Son of God. In a somewhat analogous way, the bestowal upon St. Mary during later life of a transmissable human nature essentially

perfect (which must not involve redemption, but a discontinuous cutting off from a history of involvement in Original Sin,) would have required the obliteration of a prior section of her individual history, and would therefore have done violence to her as a human person.

We must conclude that St. Mary's release from the bonds of Original Sin was made coincident with her Conception. The Blessed Virgin's Offertory was both quantitatively and *qualitatively* unique. It was the offering of both the first *matter* and of the human *essence* of our Lord. We ourselves continue to offer material content to His Body as it grows. But the qualitative Offertory of His perfect human essence was "once and for all" and not only need not, but in fact cannot, be repeated. The power to make such an Offertory for the initiation of the Incarnation in its perfected essence surpasses qualitatively the privileges given in Baptism. It was indeed what Bishop Pearson calls a "special privilege granted to her, which is incommunicable to any other."